

Message Text

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S E C R E T SECTION 1 OF 2 AMMAN 1091

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TAGS: PFOR, JO, SY, US, XF

SUBJECT: TALK WITH PRIME MINISTER -- SYRIA AND NEXT STEPS
IN THE MIDDLE EAST

SUMMARY: PRIME MINISTER RIFAI MADE FOLLOWING POINTS ON
NEXT STEPS IN MIDEAST NEGOTIATIONS UPON HIS RETURN FROM
KING'S QUICK FEB 27 VISIT TO DAMASCUS. RIFAI SAYS
ASAD HAS RELAXED AND OPEN VIEW AND WELCOMES CONTINUING
US ROLE TO PROMOTE PEACE EFFORTS. ASAD NOT REPEAT NOT
PREPARED FOR WAR NOW OR FOR CONSIDERABLE TIME IN FUTURE.
RIFAI WAS NOT EASILY DRAWN OUT ON UNDOF RENEWAL QUESTION,
MERELY SAYING SYRIA MUST HAVE SOMETHING IN RETURN FOR
RENEWAL AND THAT SYRIA IS LOOKING FOR US HELP. ASAD
THINKS ARABS CANNOT NOW NEGOTIATE ISRAELI WITHDRAWAL WITH-
OUT US HELP BUT ALSO REALIZED IT WILL BE YEARS BEFORE
ARABS CAN TAKE TERRITORIES BACK MILITARILY. NEVERTHELESS,
ASAD WILL TURN EVENTUALLY TO MILITARY SOLUTION UNLESS US
IS WILLING TO HELP OBTAIN ISRAELI WITHDRAWAL.
RIFAI THINKS TERRITORIAL ISSUE IS STILL THE CRUX AND
ASAD IS FIRST AND FOREMOST INTERESTED IN REGAINING
SYRIAN TERRITORY. ASAD WOULD PROBABLY AGREE TO RENEW
THE UNDOF MANDATE AND GO TO GENEVA (WITHOUT INSISTING
ON PLO PARTICIPATION AT LEAST AT OUTSET. IF US WOULD
COMMIT ITSELF TO RETURN OF "ALL" OCCUPIED TERRITORY (SUBJECT
TO NEGOTIATED RECIPROCAL BORDER RECTIFICATION AND IN-
SUBSTANTIAL CHANGES). RIFAI SAID HE BELIEVED US SHOULD NOW
STATE CLEARLY (BEYOND PRO FORMA SUPPORT FOR RES 242) THAT

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IT SUPPORTS RETURN OF TERRITORIES THIS WOULD WIN US ARAB

SUPPORT, RESTORE NEGOTIATING MOMENTUM AND DELIVER SYRIA, EVEN THOUGH RIFAI REALIZES ISRAELIS WOULD NOT ACCEPT THIS US POSITION. ASAD AND RIFAI BOTH SEE RECENT ISRAELI CABINET NON-BELLIGERENCY MOVE AS ANOTHER DANGEROUS SMOKE SCREEN DESIGNED TO DISTRACT US AND WORLD OPINION FROM REAL ISSUES AND TO PREPARE GROUND FOR ANOTHER UNACCEPTABLE ISRAELI TERRITORIAL SETTLEMENT OFFER. ASAD CLAIMS IT IS MERELY A RETURN TO STEP-BY-STEP. SYRIA AND JORDAN COULD NOT CONSIDER IT SERIOUSLY. RIFAI CLAIMS HE SUSPECTS SADAT HELPED ISRAELIS WORK UP NON-BELLIGERENCY PLOY. ASAD DISTURBED THAT SAUDIS AGREED TO RECENT COMMUNIQUE DURING SADAT VISIT STRESSING AVOIDANCE OF STAGNATION RATHER THAN REGAINING ARAB LANDS, BUT SUSPECTS SAUDIS WERE UNAWARE OF FULL IMPACT OF WHAT THEY AGREED TO. ALTHOUGH UNDOUBTEDLY SELF-SERVING, AND UNPALATABLE TO THE ISRAELIS, RIFAI'S SUGGESTION THAT SYRIA WOULD FORGET THE PLO-SYRIAN LINKAGE, AND STAGNATION OF NEGOTIATIONS IT PRODUCES, IF IT GOT A FORTHCOMING US POSITION ON TERRITORIAL ISSUE MAY BE WORTH LOOKING AT AND POSSIBLY EVEN EXPLORING WITH SYRIA, AS A WAY OF MAINTAINING MOMENTUM, PARTICULARLY GIVEN THE MANY APPARENT DIFFICULTIES FOR THE US OR ISRAEL IN DOING ANYTHING SIGNIFICANT ON THE PLO ISSUE. END SUMMARY.

1. IN THE COURSE OF A CONVERSATION WITH RIFAI ON HIS TRIP WITH KING TO SYRIA FEB 27, HE DESCRIBED FOR ME IN SOME DETAIL CURRENT SYRIAN POSITION AND HIS OWN ASSESSMENTS OF THE FUTURE FOR PEACE NEGOTIATIONS IN THE AREA.

2. HE BEGAN BY DESCRIBING EXTREMELY SUPPORTIVE SYRIAN REACTION TO JORDAN'S CURRENT CONTROVERSY WITH SAUDI ARABIA OVER FUNDING THE HAWK (SEPTTEL). IT WAS CLEAR FROM WHAT HE SAID THAT ASAD SEEMS TO VALUE QUITE SIGNIFICANTLY JORDAN'S US RELATIONSHIP. ASAD WAS INTERESTED ENOUGH IN TRYING TO KEEP THE HAWK DEAL ALIVE AND AVOIDING ANY SEVERING OF JORDAN'S MILITARY SUPPLY RELATION TO THE US TO LEAD ME TO BELIEVE THAT ASAD HIMSELF MAY BE SEEKING IN THE FUTURE TO BUILD ON US-JORDAN RELATIONSHIP AS AN ADDITIONAL MEANS OF TRYING

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TO OBTAIN US MILITARY EQUIPMENT.

3. I ASKED RIFAI WHERE SYRIA WAS LIKELY TO BE GOING NEXT. HE SAID THAT ASAD SEEMS TO HAVE A QUITE RELAXED AND OPEN VIEW. ASAD LEFT THE JORDANIANS WITH THE IMPRESSION, RIFAI SAYS, THAT HE STILL LOOKS FORWARD TO THE POSSIBILITY OF CLOSE COOPERATION WITH US IN THE AREA. ASAD WANTS THE US TO CONTINUE TO DEVELOP A GOOD

RELATIONSHIP WITH SYRIA AND TO TAKE AN ACTIVE ROLE IN ATTEMPTING TO MOVE THE PEACE PROCESS FURTHER AHEAD. RIFAI ALSO INDICATED THAT FROM EVERYTHING THAT ASAD SAID IT WAS CLEAR THAT ASAD WAS NOT NOW PREPARED FOR WAR AND WOULD NOT BE FOR SOME CONSIDERABLE TIME IN THE FUTURE. RIFAI SAID THAT ASAD HAD INDICATED IN THE COURSE OF THEIR LONG CONVERSATION THAT THE ONE LESSON HE LEARNED FROM THE 1973 WAR WAS THAT ISRAEL COULD HOLD ON TWO ARAB FRONTS WHILE FIGHTING AGGRESSIVELY OR OFFENSIVELY ON THE THIRD. THEREFORE SYRIA HAD TO BE IN A POSITION WHERE IT WAS CONFIDENT IT COULD TAKE ON THE FULL MIGHT OF ISRAEL ALONE BEFORE IT COULD START ANOTHER WAR. THIS REALIZATION, RIFAI SAID, MEANS THAT ASAD WILL NOT BE READY TO FIGHT AND WILL NOT DECIDE TO FIGHT FOR SOME VERY CONSIDERABLE TIME IN THE FUTURE.

4. I THEN ASKED ABOUT THE UNDOF MANDATE RENEWAL. RIFAI WAS NOT VERY EASILY DRAWN OUT. HE DID SAY THAT HE THOUGHT THE SYRIANS WOULD NEED TO HAVE SOMETHING TO POINT TO BEFORE RENEWING THE MANDATE. THIS WAS TRUE BECAUSE OF THEIR FIGHT WITH THE EGYPTIANS WHERE THEY COULD NOT BE SEEN TO AGREEING TO THE RENEWAL WITHOUT GETTING SOMETHING. IT WAS ALSO TRUE BECAUSE SYRIA FELT THAT THE US HAD TO BEGIN TO MOVE. RIGHT NOW THE SYRIANS PERCEPTION WAS THAT THE US AND THE ISRAELI POSITIONS WERE LINKED-- BOTH HOLD THE SAME VIEW. THIS ASSESSMENT WAS IN PART DERIVED FROM THE SYRIAN ANALYSIS OF OUR VETO IN JAN., ACCORDING TO RIFAI. IF THE SYRIANS COULD ONLY GET SOMETHING, RIFAI SAID, THEY WOULD RENEW THE MANDATE AND ARE IN FACT LOOKING FOR A GOOD WAY TO DO SO.

5. RIFAI SAID HIS OWN ASSESSMENT OF THE SITUATION WAS
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THAT UNDER PRESENT CIRCUMSTANCES ASAD DOES NOT BELIEVE THAT SYRIA OR THE ARABS CAN NEGOTIATE BACK THEIR TERRITORY UNDER ISRAELI OCCUPATION, THE ISRAELIS ARE TOO INTRANSIGENT AND TOO COMMITTED TO HANGING ON TO MOST OR ALL OF THE TERRITORY. ON THE OTHER HAND IT WILL BE SOME YEARS BEFORE THE ARABS CAN TAKE THESE TERRITORIES BACK MILITARILY BUT EVENTUALLY IF THEY CANNOT GET THEM BACK THROUGH NEGOTIATIONS, THEY WILL AGAIN TURN TO A MILITARY SOLUTION TO GET THEM BACK. ASAD CAN BEGIN TO BE GIVEN CONFIDENCE THAT HIS ASSESSMENT ABOUT NOT GETTING THE TERRITORY BACK THROUGH NEGOTIATION IS WRONG, ONLY IF THE US IS WILLING TO COMMIT ITSELF TO A POSITION FAVORING THE RETURN OF THE TERRITORIES.

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6. RIFAI THEN PROCEEDED TO DEVELOP THIS IDEA IN SOME DETAIL IN RESPONSE TO MY QUESTIONS. HE SAID HE THOUGHT THAT THE TERRITORIAL RETURN ISSUE WAS STILL THE CRUX OF THE PROBLEM. IF ASAD COULD GET A US COMMITMENT TO THE RETURN OF ALL OF THE OCCUPIED TERRITORY AS THEY HAD SOUGHT IN THE RESOLUTION IN JAN, IT WOULD BE POSSIBLE FOR SYRIA TO RENEW THE MANDATE AND MOVE TO GENEVA IF THAT IS WHAT THE US WANTED. I TOLD RIFAI THAT HE SEEMED TO BE FORGETTING ABOUT SYRIA'S ATTACHMENT TO THE PALESTINIANS. HE SAID HE WAS NOT AT ALL. HE SAID HIS JUDGMENT OF ASAD WAS THAT IF ASAD COULD GET A COMMITMENT FROM THE US ON THE RETURN OF ALL THE TERRITORY, HE WOULD MOVE TO TRY TO NEGOTIATE FOR THE TERRITORY IN STAGES, AND HE WOULD FORGET ABOUT HIS PAST INSISTENCE ON THE PALESTINIANS PARTICIPATING IN THE NEGOTIATIONS, AT LEAST FROM THE OUTSET. I TOLD RIFAI RATHER BLUNTLY THAT IT SEEMED THAT WAS MORE OF A SELF SERVING JORDANIAN POSITION, KNOWING THAT THE JORDANIANS WERE NOT ENTHUSIASTIC ABOUT HAVING THE PALESTINIANS IN THE NEGOTIATIONS, THAN IT WAS A PURELY OBJECTIVE ASSESSMENT OF WHAT THE SYRIANS WANTED OR WOULD ACCEPT.

7. RIFAI INSISTED THAT IT WAS NOT. HE SAID FIRST THAT HE THOUGHT THAT WE WERE WRONG IF WE ASSUMED THAT JORDAN WAS PREPARED TO FIGHT AGAINST THE PALESTINIANS BEING INCLUDED IN THE NEGOTIATIONS. JORDAN WOULD EVEN FAVORF THIS, FOR REASONS WHICH THE US HAD BEEN TOLD MANY TIMES. IN ADDITION, ASAD WAS FIRST AND FOREMOST
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INTERESTED IN SYRIA AND SYRIAN TERRITORY. WHILE HE WAS PREPARED TO FIGHT A WAR TO GET IT BACK, IF HE COULD GET IT BACK THROUGH NEGOTIATIONS IT WAS A LOGICAL AND HE WOULD RECOGNIZE THAT THE ENORMOUS LOSSES THAT A WAR COULD CAUSE FOR SYRIA AND WHICH COULD BE AVOIDED BY NEGOTIATING THEIR RETURN. UNDER THOSE CIRCUMSTANCES HIS ATTACHMENT TO PALESTINIAN ISSUE WOULD NOT STAND IN HIS WAY. RIFAI THEN SAID IT WOULD BE A RATHER EASY STEP FOR THE UNITED STATES ONCE AGAIN TO STAND IN FAVOR OF THE RETURN OF THE OCCUPIED TERRITORY TO THE ARABS. BEFORE 1973 THE US HAD DONE SO IN THE ROGER'S PLAN. SINCE THE OCTOBER WAR THE ARABS HAD NOT HEARD ONE WORD FROM THE US ABOUT THE RETURN OF THE TERRITORIES. I RECALLED FOR HIM THAT WE STOOD FOR THE RETURN OF THE TERRITORIES IN 242 (WITH INSUBSTANTIAL OR MINOR RECTIFICATIONS TO BE NEGOTIATED). RIFAI SAID THE ARABS UNDERSTOOD THIS. THE US SHOULD COME OUT IN FAVOR OF THE RETURN OF THE TERRITORIES, AND STATE THAT THIS WOULD BE THE DESIRED OBJECTIVE, BUT THAT NEGOTIATIONS FOR RECIPROCAL OR MINOR BORDER RECTIFICATIONS SHOULD TAKE PLACE IN THIS FRAMEWORK. IF WE DID THIS WE WOULD WIN BACK MUCH OF THE ARAB SUPPORT WHICH THE RECENT CASTING IN THE UNSC OF THE VETO HAD ROBBED FROM US. IN ADDITION, IT WOULD BE AN EXCELLENT WAY TO MOVE THINGS FORWARD IN THE AREA, SECURE THE RENEWAL OF THE MANDATE, AND BEGIN THE PROCESS OF NEGOTIATION.

8. THE IMPORTANT THING WAS THAT WE HAD TO TRY OUT SOMETHING LIKE THIS ON ASAD AND SEE IF WE COULD GET HIS ACCORD. ASAD RECOGNIZES, RIFAI SAID, THAT THE ISRAELIS ARE UNLIKELY TO ACCEPT THIS POSITION. BUT THE UNITED STATES DOES NOT HAVE TO UNDERTAKE TO DELIVER THE ISRAELIS ON THIS POSITION, ALL THE ARABS WANTED FROM US WAS SOME SORT OF SIGNIFICANT STATEMENT ABOUT WHERE WE THOUGHT THE PROCESS SHOULD BE GOING.

9. I ASKED RIFAI FOR HIS REACTION AND THE SYRIAN REACTION ON THE ISSUE OF NON-BELLIGERENCY AS PROPOSED BY THE ISRAELI CABINET. HE SAID HE TALKED TO ASAD ABOUT IT. ASAD WAS VERY WORRIED. HE CONCLUDED IT WAS DANGEROUS AND ANOTHER

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STEP IN THE ISRAELI EFFORT TO RAISE SIDE ISSUES, DIVERSIONS, AND TRIVIAL QUESTIONS IN ORDER FURTHER TO DISTRACT US CONCENTRATION AND WORLD OPINION ON THE MAJOR SUBJECT. IT WAS A RETURN TO STEP-

BY-STEP. RIFAI SAID HE COMPLETELY AGREED WITH THIS ASSESSMENT AND THOUGHT THE NON-BELLIGERENCY EFFORT WAS NOT ONLY A SMOKE SCREEN BUT VERY DANGEROUS FOR THE ARABS IF PURSUED BECAUSE OF THIS POTENTIAL FOR DISTRACTING THE FOCUS FROM THE MAJOR QUESTIONS.

10. HE WENT ON TO SAY THAT SYRIA WOULD NOT BE INTERESTED IN SOME MINOR TERRITORIAL CHANGES IN EXCHANGE FOR NON-BELLIGERENCY. WHAT THE ISRAELIS WERE SAYING BASICALLY IN THIS CASE WAS THAT THE ARABS COULD NOW HAVE SOME UNACCEPTABLE TERRITORIAL SETTLEMENT FOR A SMALLER PRICE -- INSTEAD OF A PEACE AGREEMENT THEY COULD HAVE IT FOR NON-BELLIGERENCY. TO THE ARABS THIS WAS SO FAR WIDE OF THE MARK THAT THEY WERE NOT PREPARED TO CONSIDER IT SERIOUSLY.

11. RIFAI THEN REPEATED THAT IN EFFECT SADAT HAD ALREADY GIVEN NON-BELLIGERENCY TO THE ISRAELIS OR NEARLY THAT. IN FACT, RIFAI SAID (HIS SUSPICIONS OF THE EGYPTIANS COMING OUT AGAIN CLEARLY) THAT IT WAS POSSIBLE THAT SADAT HAD WORKED UP THIS NON-BELLIGERENCY CAMPAIGN WITH THE ISRAELIS. ASAD HAD RAISED THIS POSSIBILITY ON THE BASIS OF HIS ANALYSIS OF THE SAUDI-EGYPTIAN COMMUNIQUE. INSTEAD OF THE EXPECTED STATEMENT OF ARAB ATTACHMENT TO THE NEED TO REGAIN THEIR OCCUPIED LANDS, THE COMMUNIQUE STATED THAT THE OBJECTIVES OF A COORDINATED ARAB POSITION FOR THE MOMENT WERE TO AVOID STAGNATION AND TO IMPROVE THE PROSPECTS FOR MOMENTUM IN THE PEACE NEGOTIATIONS. RIFAI SAID THAT ASAD WAS DISTURBED THAT THE SAUDIS HAD AGREED TO THIS AND CONCLUDED HOWEVER THE SAUDIS (AS OPPOSED TO THE EGYPTIANS) WERE PROBABLY UNAWARE OF WHAT THEY HAD DONE.

12. COMMENT: WHILE IT IS EASY TO DISMISS RIFAI'S EMPHASIS OF THE SYRIAN-PALESTINIAN LINKAGE (AS SELF-SERVING JORDANIAN VIEWS) AND HIS STRESS ON THE TERRITORIAL ISSUE AS BEING IMPORTANT IN THE TERMS OF NEXT STEPS FOR THE US, IT RAISES AN INTERESTING ALTERNATIVE. IT MIGHT WELL BE WORTH LOOKING AT, AND
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POSSIBLY EVEN FEELING ASAD OUT ON, PARTICULARLY GIVEN THE DIFFICULTIES WHICH DOING ANYTHING NOW OF SIGNIFICANCE FOR THE PALESTINIANS RAISES FOR BOTH US AND THE ISRAELIS. I CANNOT UNDERESTIMATE THE STORM WHICH IS LIKELY TO ARISE ACROSS THE JORDAN RIVER SHOULD THE US TAKE A POSITION RIFAI SUGGEST ON THE TERRITORIAL ISSUE; HOWEVER, IT SEEMS FROM THIS PERSPECTIVE THAT IT IS A QUESTION MORE LIKELY TO BE UNDERSTOOD BY BOTH THE AMERICAN PUBLIC AND THE ARAB WORLD IN GENERAL, AND PERHAPS THEREFORE MORE EFFECTIVE, IF WE ARE LOOKING FOR WAYS TO KEEP THE PROCESS MOVING AHEAD IN THIS AREA. END COMMENT

13. SUGGEST DEPARTMENT REPEAT TO CAIRO AND DAMASCUS.
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